

## Almost Half of Hired Farmworkers 25 Years and Older Earn Poverty-Level Wages

*The demographic characteristics of hired farmworkers have changed little during the 1990's. These workers continue to earn about 58 percent as much as all wage and salary workers. About 45 percent of all hired farmworkers 25 years and older are low-wage earners who earn less than the poverty threshold for a family of four. Over one-third have annual family incomes of less than \$15,000.*

**H**ired farmworkers accounted for less than 1 percent (840,000) of all wage and salary workers in 1999. They made up one-third of the farm workforce, yet this proportion understates their contribution to the total farm production process. Hired farmworkers provide the labor at critical production times when operators and family members are unable to supply the necessary labor. Hired farmwork is often seasonal, is usually performed outdoors, involves lifting and carrying heavy objects, and pays substantially less than most other occupations. The overwhelming share of hired farmworkers (82 percent) work at planting, cultivating, and harvesting crops or tending to livestock. Smaller numbers are employed as farm managers (9 percent), supervisors of farmworkers (5 percent), and nursery workers (4 percent).

### Demographic Characteristics of Hired Farmworkers Change Little

The size of the hired farm labor force in 1999 was 40,000 (or 4 percent) fewer than for the previous year (app. table 5). Demographic groups with larger than average decreases included men (8 percent), white non-Hispanic workers (7 percent), workers ages 25-34 (13 percent), workers with fewer than 9 years of education (20 percent), and workers employed in the Northeast. Women had the largest increase between 1998 and 1999.

Compared with all wage and salary workers, hired farmworkers are predominately male, Hispanic, young, never married, less educated, noncitizens, and located in the South and West census regions (table 1). Many of these differences persisted throughout the 1990's, although some changes, such as the increase in Hispanic farmworkers, most likely resulted from CPS survey design changes in 1994. Since 1994, neither the number nor percentage of hired farmworkers who reported they are not U.S. citizens changed significantly. The percentage of hired farmworkers has decreased in the South, increased significantly in the West since 1994, and stayed the same in the Northeast and Midwest (app. tables 5 and 6).

### Hired Farmworkers' Family Incomes, Earnings Lag Most Other Occupations

Hired farmworkers have slightly lower family incomes than all wage and salary workers. About 64 percent of hired farmworkers had family incomes of less than \$30,000 in 1999, compared with 36 percent of all wage and salary workers (table 2). Even more striking, almost 68 percent (451,000 of 668,000 workers) of full-time hired farmworkers, those who usually worked 35 or more hours per week, had family incomes of less than \$30,000 in 1999.

The median weekly earnings of all hired farmworkers (\$280) were about 58 percent of the median weekly earnings of all wage and salary workers (\$479) (table 1). The median weekly earnings for full-time hired farmworkers (\$320) were also about 58 percent of those for all full-time wage and salary workers (\$550) (app. tables 5 and 6). Full-time hired farmworkers earned less than those in most occupations, except for private household and other nonprotective services (fig. 1).

### Most Hired Farmworkers Are Low-Wage Workers

Low-wage workers are defined here as those 25 years of age and over whose earnings, on a full-time full-year equivalent basis, fall below the official U.S. weighted average poverty threshold for a family of four (\$17,028). In 1999, there were 585,000 hired farmworkers 25 years and older, about 47 percent of whom earned low wages. The percentage of full-time hired farmworkers with low wages was higher than in other occupations, except for private household and other nonprotective services (fig. 2).

## Population and Employment

Table 1

### Demographic and earnings characteristics of hired farmworkers and all wage and salary workers, 1999

*Almost all demographic characteristics of the hired farm workforce differ from those of all wage and salary workers*

Characteristics	Hired farmworkers		All wage and salary workers	
	Thousands	Percent	Thousands	Percent
All	840	100	119,130	100
Gender:				
Male	678	80.7*	61,986	52.0
Female	162	19.3*	57,144	48.0
Race:				
White	425	50.6*	87,100	73.1
Hispanic	361	43.0*	12,852	10.8
Black and other	54	6.4*	19,178	16.1
Education completed:				
0-4 years	95	11.3*	831	.7
5-8 years	189	22.6*	3,246	2.7
9-11 years	174	20.7*	11,817	9.9
12 years	228	27.1*	37,575	31.6
13 years or more	154	18.3*	65,661	55.1
Age (years):				
Less than 20	130	15.5*	7,488	6.3
20-24	125	14.9*	12,522	10.5
25-34	196	23.3	28,599	24.0
35-44	174	20.7*	32,354	27.2
45-54	122	14.5*	24,598	20.6
55 and over	93	11.1	13,569	11.4
Citizenship status:				
U.S. citizen	556	66.2*	110,423	92.7
Not U.S. citizen	284	33.8*	8,707	7.3
Census region:				
Northeast	57	6.8*	22,422	18.8
South	277	32.9*	28,970	24.3
Midwest	164	19.6*	41,636	35.0
West	342	40.7*	26,082	21.9
			Years	
Median age	33*		38	
			Dollars	
Median weekly earnings	\$280*		\$479	

\*Significantly different from all wage and salary workers at the 95-percent confidence level.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Current Population Survey earnings microdata file.

Low-wage hired farmworkers tend to possess many of the same characteristics associated with low-wage employment in other occupations. More than half of the low-wage hired farmworkers were Hispanic, and over 64 percent completed less than 12 years of education, a much higher proportion than either the general labor force or the low-wage workforce as a whole. In addition, low-wage hired farmworkers were more likely to work in crop production (61 percent) and more likely to be U.S. citizens (56 percent).

Table 2

**Family income of hired farmworkers and all wage and salary workers, 1999<sup>1</sup>**

*Hired farmworkers have significantly lower family incomes than all wage and salary workers*

Income	Hired farmworkers		All wage and salary workers	
	Thousands	Percent	Thousands	Percent
Total	840	100	119,130	100
Less than \$10,000	198	23.5*	17,619	14.8
\$10,000-\$14,999	192	22.8*	10,508	8.8
\$15,000-\$29,999	146	17.4*	14,484	12.2
\$30,000-\$39,000	112	13.3	14,859	12.5
\$40,000-\$49,999	48	5.8*	12,500	10.5
\$50,000 and over	144	17.2*	49,160	41.2

\*Significantly different from all wage and salary workers at the 95-percent confidence level.

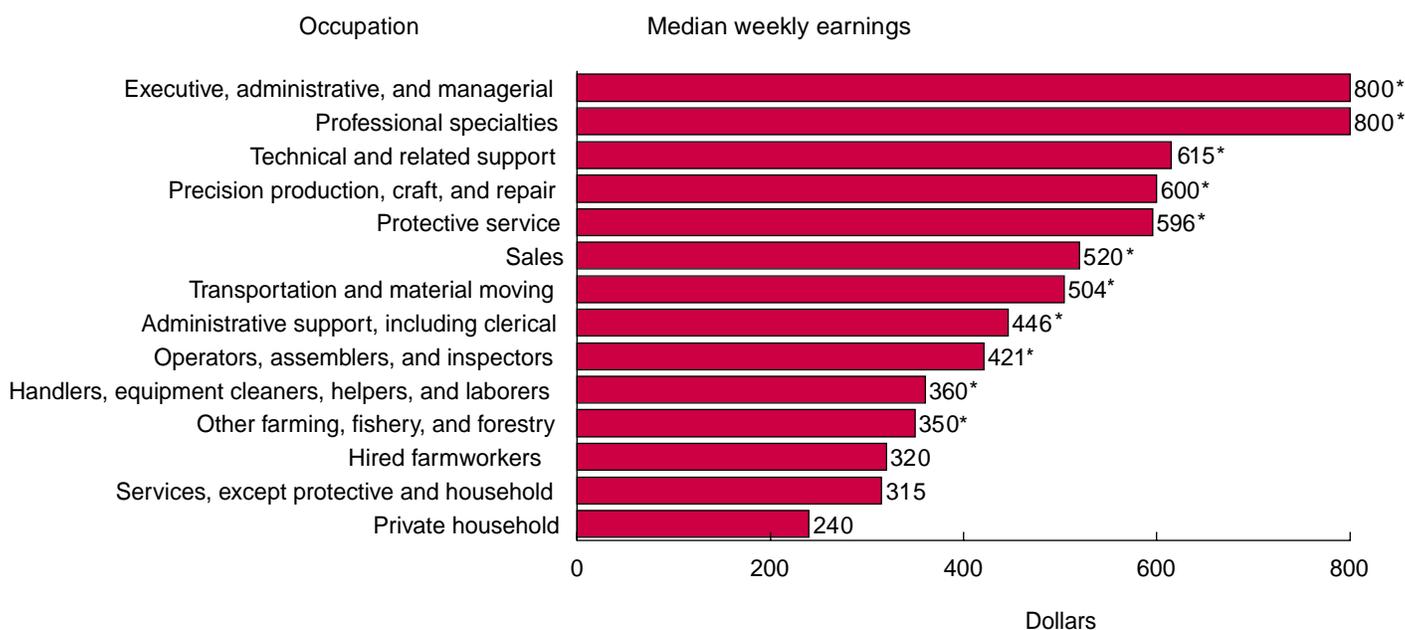
<sup>1</sup>Combined income of all family members during the last 12 months. Includes money from jobs; net income from businesses, farms, or rents; pensions, dividends, interest, social security payments; and any other money income received by family members who are 15 years of age and older.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Current Population Survey earnings microdata file.

Figure 1

**Median weekly earnings of full-time workers, by occupation, 1999**

*Hired farmworkers rank near the bottom of major occupational groups*



\*Significantly different from hired farmworkers at the 95-percent confidence level.

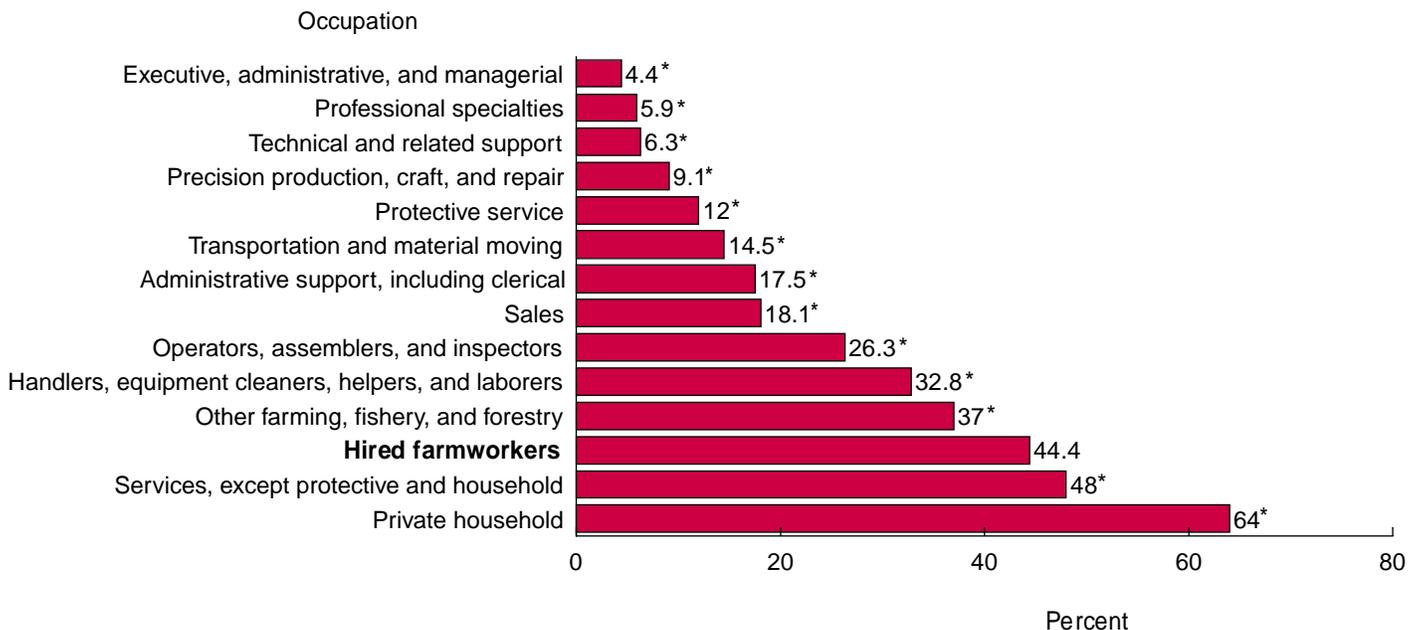
Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the 1999 Current Population Survey earnings microdata file.

## Population and Employment

Figure 2

### Full-time workers who are low-wage workers, by occupation, 1999

Hired farmworkers rank near the top of low-wage earners



\*Significantly different from hired farmworkers at the 95-percent confidence level.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the 1999 Current Population Survey earnings microdata file.

These characteristics showed little change when the analysis was limited to the 519,000 hired farmworkers 25 years of age and older working full time. About 231,000 of these workers (44 percent of those 25 years of age and older) earned low wages. More than half these workers were Hispanic (65 percent), nearly half (49 percent) had less than a 9th-grade education, over 60 percent worked in crop production, and over half (51 percent) were U.S. citizens. Also, over 60 percent of them had family incomes less than \$15,000 in the last 12 months. [Jack L. Runyan, 202-694-5438, jrunyan@ers.usda.gov]